

# From 'Heidegger to Suhrawardi': An Introduction to the thought of Henry Corbin<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

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One is overwhelmed when confronted by the sheer size of Corbin's oeuvre and nothing less than a comprehensive survey of his work and biography can yield up the influences on his thought. Corbin referred to himself as a philosopher guided by the Spirit following it wherever it took him. Thus, his intellectual journey took him back and forth between different spiritual worlds. Perhaps his genius lies in his ability to "valorize," as he describes it, the worlds of other cultures and previous eras over the "arc of a lifetime."<sup>2</sup>

Corbin's philosophy owes much to classical and medieval philosophy, occultism, the History of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*), Lutheran theology, the Christian esoteric tradition (Jacob Boehme, Immanuel Swedenborg, etc...) and Islamic gnosis (Shi'ite, Ismaili, and Sufi), out of which Corbin produced a "brilliantly polished, absolutely authentic, and utterly irreproducible mixture."<sup>3</sup> It has been claimed that he was the greatest esoterist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Corbin's own life epitomizes the esoteric quest from the outer to the inner, from the literal to the symbolic, and from appearance to true Reality. It is the movement of the soul in its return to its original abode. Such is Corbin's journey, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi."<sup>5</sup>

Underlying this passage is a journey from one world to another, from "our contemporary, post-Nietzschean world to the 'perennial' worlds of Iranian Theosophy." "Persia was right there in the centre, as median and mediating world,"<sup>6</sup> Corbin said. It was in the spiritual world of Iran that Corbin found his home in the companion of Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi the Iranian born theosopher of Illumination, "The Imam of the Persian Platonists" or the Oriental Theosopher as Corbin would call him. Suhrawardi would be Corbin's closest companion for the rest of his life. With Suhrawardi's *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, a book Corbin translated as *The Oriental Theosophy*, "a Platonism, expressed in terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia," Corbin's "spiritual destiny" was "sealed."<sup>7</sup> Suhrawardi was the self-proclaimed "resurrector

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction is intended to be a commentary and elucidation of Corbin's philosophy in the context of his intellectual genealogy. I would like to acknowledge my enormous debt and gratitude to Mr. Robert Avens and Mr. Tom Cheetham for their patience with my questions, their long and helpful remarks, and their wonderful publications on Corbin, both of whom have become dedicated scholars of Corbin in the English-speaking world. I would also like to acknowledge my debt to Christopher Bamford's work on Corbin, which helped clarify the early period of Corbin's intellectual career.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Corbin. *Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview* (1978), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Steven M. Wasserstrom. *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) in Wasserstrom, p. 173 and p. 323 Chapter 11 Note no. 3.

<sup>5</sup> This is the title of one of the last interviews with Henry conducted by Philip Nemo in which Corbin lays out a philosophical itinerary of his intellectual developments from Heidegger to Suhrawardi and his *Ishraqi* School of Illuminative Philosophy. See Henry Corbin . "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," *Interview with Philip Nemo*, (This interview was recorded for *Radio France-Culture*, on Wednesday, the second of June 1976)

<sup>6</sup> Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 3. Wasserstrom calls the transhistorical trajectory of Corbin's reading of Suhrawardi as operating under "the sign of the Aryan," by which he means a nationalistic and chauvinistic return to a pre-Islamic and pre-Arab primitive Aryanism. I

of the Illuminationist Theosophy of the ancient Persian sages.”<sup>8</sup> The combination of a Platonism of the Greeks with the Zoroastrian angelology and philosophy of Light and Darkness of Ancient Persia left a lasting impression on the young Corbin who had by then already considered himself part of a spiritual fellowship, “a new spiritual chivalry that unites Hermetic, Neoplatonic, Christian, Jewish, and Gnostic theosophers of the West with the Oriental theosophers of Iranian Islam.”<sup>9</sup> Luther, Swedenborg, Hamann, Barth, and Heidegger were suddenly in the company of each other and in the company of an Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi, and Mulla Sadra.

However, despite Corbin’s love for Iran, which he described as the “homeland to philosophers and poets,” he would forever carry with him another integral encounter, this one with the “old Germany” that was also a “homeland to philosophers and poets.” Behind the towering figure of Heidegger, who was extremely influential on Corbin’s thought, stand the no less important figures of Luther, Hamann, Swedenborg, and Barth. One may conclude that by the time Corbin’s journey took him to the Orient, his theosophical vision was “German in provenance;”<sup>10</sup> this was the period of Corbin the “Protestant theologian.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed the sense of urgency and the apocalyptic vision one finds in all of Corbin’s work owes much to Schleiermacher and Barth, Otto and Heidegger, Jung<sup>12</sup> and Swedenborg. One finds the seeds of Corbin’s philosophy in his early transition “from fin-de-siècle French Catholicism to an idiosyncratic, Weimar-era, radicalized German Lutheranism.”<sup>13</sup> The key influences of Hamann, Luther, and Heidegger stand out. (We shall explore Heidegger in the next section).

If we consider Corbin’s contributions to *Hic et Nunc*<sup>14</sup> (1932-1934), it reveals strong Barthian influences (early Barth). The general tenor of a contribution made by Corbin reveals a rejection of traditional “religious thought” in favor of a

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think Wasserstrom’s designation is false because he reduces Corbin to the historical circumstances Corbin found himself in see Wasserstrom, p. 134. For a critique of Wasserstrom on this same issues see Salman. H. Bashier. *Ibn al-Arabi’s Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 25-27.

<sup>8</sup> Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Bamford. “Esotericism Today: The Example of Henry Corbin,” introduction to *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*. Translated by Joseph Rowe (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1998), p. XV.

<sup>10</sup> Corbin’s discovery of Suhrawardi did not detract him from continuing his work with Massignon and Gilson, Benveniste, Alexandre Koyre (who was working on Boehme and Paracelsus), and Henri-Charles Puech (who was working on Manicheism). In the 1930’s, Corbin traveled to Marburg where he met with Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, Ernst Benz, and Karl Loewith (who introduced Corbin to the thought of Hamann and Hamann’s near contemporary, Oettinger); in Marburg also, Corbin was handed his first copy of Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* by Albert-Marie Schmidt and had read Heidegger vehemently, whom he met later in Freiburg. See Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxx In Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 5 we find: “Marburg an der Lahn! That “inspired hill” that “lived by and for the university;” this is how Corbin remembers it and it was a turning point. There Corbin established strong relations with Rudolf Otto and Friedrich Heiler not to mention the encounters with Rabindranath Tagore and Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. Ernst Benz the “eminent specialist in Swedenborgian studies” would also prove pivotal for Corbin’s own understanding of Swedenborg. Corbin would also make use of the “expert phenomenologist” Gerhard Kruger who was also at Marburg. One cannot also forget Corbin’s two visits to Hamburg where Ernst Cassirer was teaching. Cassirer the philosopher of “symbolic forms” would reveal to Corbin the brilliant intellectual tradition of the Cambridge Platonists.

<sup>11</sup> During this same period of the 1930’s, Corbin had immersed himself in the German theological tradition and would refer to it as the “lineage of hermeneutics:” Jacob Boehme, Martin Luther, Johann Georg Hamann, and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

<sup>12</sup> In August 1949, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, the organizer of the Eranos Circle, which began in 1932 in Ascona, Switzerland, invited Corbin to join the group with a series of lectures that continued over the period of two decades. At Eranos, Corbin was in the company of Carl Gustav Jung, Gershom Scholem, D.T. Suzuki, and many others. For Corbin’s involvement in this group is Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*.

<sup>13</sup> Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> Corbin was introduced to Karl Barth by Professor Theodor Siegfried, who had passed his habilitation with Rudolf Otto. Professor Siegfried handed Corbin a copy of Barth’s commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans*. Corbin translated Karl Barth’s opuscles: Die Not der evangelischen Kirche or La détresse de l’Eglise protestante (The Distress of the Protestant Church); however, Corbin notes Pierre Maury gave it the title: Misère et Grandeur de l’Eglise évangélique (Grandeur and Misery of the Evangelical Church). See Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 6. Corbin also collaborated with the Russian émigré philosopher Alexandre Kojève and co-founded with Denis de Rougemont, Albert-Marie Schmidt, Roland de Pury, and Roger Jezequel, *Hic et Nunc*, a journal for theological renewal. The inspiration for the journal *Hic et Nunc* was the “Platonizing Barth” of the *Epistle to the Romans* and not the Karl Barth of the *Dogmatics*. Corbin soon discovered the distance

notion of “witness.” The editorial urged substituting Franz von Baader’s *cogitor*, “I am thought,” for the Cartesian *cogito*. In a similar vein, Corbin called for a philosophy-theology of response to the Divine call. “Spirit can only reveal; I can only listen.” Corbin invokes a non-historical notion of resurrection as the affirmation of the ever present “New Human.” Finally, Corbin’s final article in this journal called for a Christian philosophy as an encounter with the Word.

The encounter with the Word was clearly a Lutheran theme; the engagement as a listener with the spoken Word is the only true historical reality.<sup>15</sup> The influence of Luther was pivotal for Corbin’s philosophical preparation; for it was Luther who taught Corbin the crucial fact of *Verbum solum habemus* (we have only the Word). Corbin writes,

Comprehension is faith: the “comprehending” of faith, the “hermeneia” that makes true exegesis possible, is truth; and as truth it is the topology of the letter, a modification realized through each one of the faithful, by and for faith. The letter spiritually understood realizes itself, gains its actual reality, in faith, and is *fides Christi*, that is to say, the reality of the justification, which is realized in the *theologia crucis*, itself the negation of man. Hermeneutics is thus the actual reality of anthropology. A text is not given, an In-Itself, but a For-Us. And it is by *faith* that it is for-us and really exists.<sup>16</sup>

Luther had also taught Corbin the “revelatory function” of the *significatio passiva*-the role of passive meaning in the understanding and interpretation of the Word.<sup>17</sup> This term figures prominently in Corbin’s study of medieval philosophy and represents a fundamental turning point in his understanding of ‘being’ and ‘knowing.’ In response to the dilemma posed by the Psalm verse “*In justitia tua libera me*,” Luther underwent a moment of revolt and despair. What relation was there between justice in this verse and his deliverance? In a sudden flash, he understood that this attribute of God, this quality of justice, cannot be understood as a quality we confer upon God, but it must be understood in its *significatio passiva*. That is to say that God’s justice is to be understood in as much it occurs within me. Corbin,

The Divine names are not the attributes conferred by the theoretical intellect upon the divine Essence as such; they are essentially the vestiges of their action in us, of the action by which they fulfill their being through our being...In other words, we discover them only insofar as they occur and are made within us, according to what they make of us, insofar as they are our *passion*.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, the divine attributes cannot be understood (*modus intelligendi*) except in relation to us, our mode of being, (*modus essendi*.) This relationship is what makes possible “an Understanding that is not a theoretical inspection but a *passion* lived and shared with the understood object, a com-passion, a sympathy.”<sup>19</sup>

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separating the “commentary of the Römerbrief [Epistle to the Romans], with its prophetic sparks” and the “heavy, colossal Dogmatics” of the later Barth. Corbin had sent Barth his translation of Suhrawardi’s *The Rustling of Gabriel’s Wings*, which Barth shrugged off as “natural theology.” Corbin had learned from Suhrawardi that when a philosophy no longer merits the name, “it was necessary to rediscover the Sophia of another philosophy.” See Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 7. Corbin remarks that when Barth heard Corbin mentioning Phillippe Marheineke, one of those “speculative theologians” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he asked: “You have read Marheineke, Mr. Corbin?” Corbin had discerned in Barth a great sympathy for this “speculative theologian,” which Corbin found difficult to explain. Perhaps, Corbin asks, there remained a gulf between Barth’s “dialectical theology” and a Hegelian theology of the Right. Corbin would find a solution to the problems posed by Barth’s “dialectical theology” in Suhrawardi but more so in the theosophy of Ibn Arabi.

<sup>15</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. xxxv.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. xxxiv.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 116 and footnote 25, p. 300.

Corbin found this fundamental notion in many of the mystical philosophers of Islam, and had it not been for the “key of the *significatio passiva*,” that he had studied in Luther, he may have not been able to understand his mystical Islamic philosophers. The Arabic imperative: KN<sup>20</sup>, or Esto, puts the emphasis neither on *ens* nor on the *esse* but on the *esto*. “Be! This imperative inaugurator of *Being*, this is the divine imperative in its active aspect (*amr fi’li*); but considered in the *being* that it makes *to be*, the *being* that we are, none other than this same imperative, but in its *significatio passiva* (*amr maf’ûli*.)”<sup>21</sup>

Corbin would later find parallels with Luther in the works of Ibn Arabi in whose work, “the divine attributes are qualifications that we impute to the Divine Essence not as convention might bid us postulate it, but as we experience it in ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> The divine names are not attributes conferred by the human intellect upon the Divine Essence; they are the traces of their action in us, of that action by which they fulfill their being through us. That is to say, we discover the true meaning of the Divine names “insofar as they occur and are made within us, according to what they make of us, insofar as they are our *passion*.”<sup>23</sup> In the words of Ibn Arabi: “Those to whom God remains veiled pray to the God who in their belief is their Lord to have compassion with them. But the intuitive mystics [*Ahl al-Kashf*] ask that divine compassion be fulfilled [come into being, exist] through them.”<sup>24</sup>

Hence, the contemplative hermeneutics Corbin found in Luther and later in Ibn Arabi rests on the primacy of the *coincidentia oppositorum*; a conjunction between passion and action, between *Deus Absconditus* and *Deus Revelatus*, the Hidden and the Revealed. Corbin had already discovered this paradoxical principle in Hamann. Corbin: “Le paradoxe correspond exactement à l’uni-totalité de l’être humain, à la fois comme homme caché et homme extérieur. Simultanéité qui avait conduit le Mage au principe de la ‘*coincidentia oppositorum*.’”<sup>25</sup> However, it was later in his monographs on the “mundus imaginalis,” which Corbin considered as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, that he would make explicit use of the principle.<sup>26</sup> In his late essay, “The *Imago Templi* in Confrontation with Secular Norms,” Corbin would identify the *coincidentia oppositorum* as the key to spiritual generation, as the philosopher’s stone in the alchemical transformation and identity of microcosm and macrocosm.”<sup>27</sup> In his work on the *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, Corbin quotes Abu Said al-Kharraz: “Whereby do you know God,” he was asked, to which he replied: “By the fact that he is the *coincidentia oppositorum*.” Ibn Arabi and Corbin often quote Abu Said al-Kharraz’s saying: “I have know God by His bringing together of opposites.”<sup>28</sup>

The “Magus of the North,” as Corbin would call him, Hamann exerted an important influence on Corbin’s thought. Hamann represented in his own life and works a “living synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem, Plato and Luther, Old and New

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> This is also the Divine Imperative, which inaugurates existence itself as in the Quranic verse: “God creates what He **wills** when He **wills** a thing to **be**, He but says unto it, 'Be' - and it is.” (Quran, 3:47).

<sup>21</sup> My Italics. Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 300 no. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam, The Bezels of Wisdom*, I, 178 and II, 250 n. 8. quoted in Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 117, no. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Corbin, Hamann, philosophe du lutheranisme, cited by Daryush Shayegan in Henry Corbin: *La topographie spirituelle de l’Islam Iranien*, Paris: L’Herne, 1990, p. 41. quoted in Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, translated by Philip Sherrad & Liadain Sherrad, (London: KPI & Islamic Publications, 1986), p. 375-376. See also Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 375-376. see also Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 71.

Testaments.” Hamann called this “living synthesis” “Verbalism,” which Corbin would later call “mystical hermeneutics.”<sup>29</sup> In particular, Corbin read Hamann’s *Aesthetica in Nuce* (*Aesthetics in a nutshell*) and translated it into French.<sup>30</sup> Hamann was a harsh critic of Kant and had rejected all Rationalism because it inevitably “leads to idealism, to the disjunction of the ego, self, and world.” As a result, Hamann laid the emphasis on the unity of opposites “present in the radical self-knowledge of the *communicatio idiomatica* of spirit and flesh, divine and human.”<sup>31</sup> So central was the union of opposites in Hamann, that he saw it as a pre-condition for truth, the absence of which results in dogmatism. Corbin would later understand the paradox at the heart of all monotheisms in a similar light.

Hamann had rejected the Cartesian “*cogito ergo sum*,” and affirmed in its stead faith, the Biblical “*sum ergo cogito*.” For Hamann, the *sum* rests on the deeper “polarity and simultaneity” of both the divine and the human in us. This simultaneity, Hamann explains, is “the master key to all human knowledge and to the whole visible economy.”<sup>32</sup> God’s compassion and humility towards his creation descends through the Holy Spirit and is revealed in images and symbols. Everything in nature is a symbol, the Word made flesh for “in images consist all the treasure of human knowledge and human happiness.”<sup>33</sup> For Hamann, this means that God is always speaking to us, in the here and now. “All the miracles of Holy Scripture take place in our souls,” and “each Biblical story is a prophecy which realizes itself through the centuries in the history of each human being.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, nothing is past or future; everything is present for one in whom the flames of the Divine are burning. The universe speaks, creature to creature, and “to speak is to translate....from angelic tongue into human tongue, that is to say, thoughts into words, things into names, images into signs....”<sup>35</sup> Corbin comments:

We must understand this act of translation as the absolutely primal act, not as the decipherment of an already given and imposed text, but as the very apparition of things, their revelation by their being named.....Here hermeneutical technique is sketched out, the communion of the literal sense and the internal sense in a single meaning: the prophetic sense.<sup>36</sup>

Corbin was clearly heavily influenced by Hamann who represented for Corbin, along with Friedrich von Schelling and Franz von Baader, the German Romantic thinkers. Such was the influence of the German Romantics on Corbin that Muhsin Mahdi would later describe as one: “Corbin was in many ways the last of the German Romantics.”<sup>37</sup>

Germany or Iran, Freiburg or Isfahan; these resembled for Corbin “emblematic cities.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Corbin never subscribed to any of the compartmentalizing descriptions that may have been attributed to him. “Iran and Germany were

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<sup>29</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>30</sup> Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Hamann, quoted in Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxxvii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>36</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>37</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, “Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, 1990, p. 73-98, at 92. quoted in Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Corbin, “Emblematic Cities: A Response to the Images of Henri Steirlin,” *Temenos Journal* 10, (London: Temenos Academy, 1990). Corbin defines Athens as an “emblematic city.” An emblematic city is a “place which no longer belongs to the topography of this world.” It is a place in which the so many conquests of the mundus imaginalis are played out. “For Proclus, the Athens of Plato’s Parmenides was emblematic of the interworld, the meeting-place between philosophers of nature,” the school of Ionia who come from Clazomene, and the philosophers of Ideas,” represented by the Italian school of Parmenides and Zeno. “Beneath the day-to-day London, William Blake discerns a London more

thus the geographical reference points of a Quest that, in point of fact, pursued its course in spiritual regions that do not appear upon our maps.”<sup>39</sup> Corbin considered himself a philosopher on a *Quest* first and foremost, but a philosopher waging a campaign:

A philosopher’s campaign must be led simultaneously on many fronts....The philosopher’s investigations should encompass a wide enough field that the visionary philosophies of a Jacob Boehme, of an Ibn ‘Arabi, of a Swedenborg etc.....Otherwise *philosophia* no longer has anything to do with *Sophia*. My education is originally philosophical, which is why, to all intents and purposes, I am neither a Germanist nor an Orientalist, but a Philosopher pursuing his Quest wherever the Spirit guides him. If it has guided me towards Freiburg, towards Teheran, towards Ispahan, for me the latter remain essentially “emblematic cities”, the symbols of a permanent voyage.<sup>40</sup>

Corbin’s quest and movement into different spiritual worlds led him to penetrate deeper into the spiritual traditions he was studying to uncover a “hidden *Harmonia Abrahamica*, a secret diatessaron of the religions of the Book, wherein mystical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam find in a prophetic religion of the Spirit a common bond with Zoroastrianism, [and] Manicheanism.”<sup>41</sup> As Corbin’s friend and colleague in Tehran Daryush Shayegan describes him, Corbin was an “architect of the invisible.” Thus, to invoke Corbin’s name, is “to invoke the primacy of the invisible.”<sup>42</sup>

In the next section, we shall chart Corbin’s passage from Heidegger to Suhrawardi. This passage was not only one from the person of Heidegger to the person of Suhrawardi, but it also signifies Corbin’s passage from a world of post-Nietzschean philosophy to a world of profound spirituality. One of the fundamental problems Corbin found with the modern world was its loss of the hierarchy of spiritual worlds and its focus on the empirical sensible realm only. Even an anti-modern and towering figure like Heidegger could not completely escape this kind of criticism despite his monumental intellectual achievement. As such, we shall compare Heidegger’s metaphysics of being with Suhrawardi’s metaphysics of presence in order to see the fundamental differences that emerge when the two philosophies are juxtaposed. We shall see that although both authors analyze being and prioritize being, we shall discover with Corbin that the missing element in modern philosophy is the element of the sacred. Corbin doubted whether the problems posed by the modern world could be solved by a wholesale rejection of the spiritual worlds. In order for the modern world to overcome its “agnostic reflex,” it must restore to its existence the spiritual dimension. We will conclude the section with the realization that the dimension the *act of being* must have is the dimension of *presence*; but unlike Heidegger’s presence, it must be a *presence* to the interworlds of the imagination, the intermediary world of the soul, which is possible only within a traditional hierarchical cosmology.

## **From Heidegger to Suhrawardi: From the Metaphysics of Being to the Metaphysics of Presence**

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real than the London visible to bodily eyes, and for which it is accountable.” London and Jerusalem are imaginalized into the “City of Golgonooza.” “Thus,” Corbin tells us, “the map of Jerusalem enables us to decipher the map of London.” For Corbin, it was Isfahan, the architectural and intellectual gem of the Safavid Period that is emblematic for him.

<sup>39</sup> Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xv.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. XV.

## The Metaphysics of Being in Heidegger's *Being and Time*

When we turn Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) we are in the presence of a figure who was always at the centre of Corbin's philosophical concerns and who was one of the most influential thinkers on Corbin's thought.<sup>43</sup> However, one finds the greatest traces of Heidegger dispersed throughout Corbin's oeuvre. Many of Corbin's contemporaries were under the sway of Heidegger's immense influence, not the least in Germany where Heideggerian philosophy had dominated the German philosophic scene. In Heidegger, "Corbin simultaneously and definitively found the work of Luther and Hamann fulfilled."<sup>44</sup> Heidegger's *Being and Time* crystallized some of the key themes that had been preoccupying Corbin's intellectual horizon at the time. If we dwell on Heidegger at length it is because of this reason. However, it is the early Heidegger that we shall focus on because by the time of the later Heidegger, Corbin had already sealed his fate in the Orient and did not turn himself towards any systematic re-reading of any of Heidegger's later works despite his admission that it would repay a lifetime.

Heidegger figures prominently in Corbin's understanding of phenomenology and hermeneutics and was, in Corbin's own words, "decisive" in his understanding of Islamic Philosophy.<sup>45</sup> Heidegger, a disciple of Husserl, differed from his mentor's teachings by shifting the focus of phenomenology from consciousness to *Being*, as the primary underlying reality, thus, revolutionizing "phenomenology" almost beyond recognition.<sup>46</sup> It is fitting at this point to indicate that much of Heidegger's thought was influenced by medieval theology and a strain of Neoplatonic Christian mysticism.<sup>47</sup>

Faithful to this anti-modern and anti-enlightenment movement of a Nietzschean kind, Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, had accused Western philosophy of the oblivion of *Being* by its increasing concentration on epistemology. In the chapter titled "On the Task of Destroying the History of Ontology," Heidegger, like the Corbin he influenced, attempted a radical critique of Western thought by returning to a more primordial understanding of what it means to "be." Heidegger was calling for nothing less than a "collective *Renovatio*" that would *overcome* traditional philosophy and its underpinning monotheistic metaphysics,<sup>48</sup> or what Heidegger called "onto-theology."

For Heidegger, the understanding of *Being*, what he calls "fundamental ontology", is prior to any epistemology simply because epistemology is grounded in ontology. To accomplish his task, Heidegger hearkened back to a Pre-Socratic understanding of Being (*sein*), especially in Parmenides. *Being*, accordingly, is that which underlies all of reality; it precedes all other considerations because all considerations presuppose it. Without a proper understanding of Being, no proper knowledge is possible. In the most simple predicative sentence "I am" the "I" presupposes *Being* and the existence of the subject, even before the assertion "am" is uttered. Heidegger compares Being to the very air we breathe "Being is the ether

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<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Corbin was the first translator of Heidegger into French whom he had met in Freiburg Germany in the spring of 1934 during which he translated a number of opuscles and excerpts under the title: "Qu'est ce que la métaphysique?" [What is metaphysics?]. See Corbin, *Biographical Post-scriptum*, p. 8. Heidegger would remain crucial for Corbin throughout his life. In 1951 and 1966, Corbin concluded his lectures by invoking Heidegger. See Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 136 and note 59. See also Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*, translated by Joseph Rowe, (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1998), p. 88 and 214. There is disagreement over how far Heidegger's influence on Corbin can be stretched.

<sup>44</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxxix.

<sup>45</sup> See Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi."

<sup>46</sup> Wasserstrom, p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> See Sonya Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence: Heidegger and Medieval Mystical Theology*, (New York, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). See also. John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978).

<sup>48</sup> Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 138-139.

in which man breathes.’ It is *there*, often as a vague awareness, even though we do not notice it. Thus, Being, is beyond every entity and every possible characteristic pertaining to any entity. ‘*Being is the transcendens pure and simple.*’<sup>49</sup>

How do we bring to the fore that vague awareness that we are? It is important for Heidegger to establish the primordially of the awareness of our existence. ‘*But this vague average understanding of Being is still a fact.*’<sup>50</sup> Being cannot be discovered via classical means of genus-species definition. In fact, Heidegger attacks the Aristotelian definition of categories. Here Heidegger begins with an account of *Dasein* in its everydayness; departing from the fact of a vague awareness through detailed analysis to an explicit account of *Dasein*. The Being of humans is quite distinct from that of other beings or creatures for the simple fact that only humans are capable of raising the question of their own *being*, despite the apparent circularity of the inquiry. Inquiry into Being must begin with *Dasein* only because the *meaning* of Being can only be significant for one who poses the question of its meaning in the first place. Thus, Heidegger designates the special entity from which the exploration of Being must begin as *Dasein*.<sup>51</sup>

*Dasein* is Heidegger’s designation for that about human beings that has ‘‘ontological priority over every other entity’’ and which allows the appearance of everything else.<sup>52</sup> Thus according to Heidegger, the Cartesian and epistemological model that postulates a subject-object relationship is fundamentally flawed. We do not exist as autonomous subjects in an object-filled world trying to understand it. The subject-object relationship cannot be the primary structure of our being-in-the-world simply because any mode of knowing presupposes a mode of being.

*Dasein*, literally translated as ‘‘being-there,’’ is that aspect of man in his openness towards Being; that ontological and phenomenological structure that is the condition for all the possibilities of presence. All philosophical explorations, which Heidegger describes as ontological, must begin with *Dasein*. As such, Heidegger rejects the Aristotelian notion of categories and essences. The essence of *Dasein* is not an attribute or quality such as that of an entity because *Dasein* is not an entity. The essence of *Dasein* is simply *Dasein*’s existence. ‘‘*The essence of Dasein lies in its existence.*’’<sup>53</sup> This existence, this *Being-There*, is the pre-conceptual/ontological condition for the presence of anything at all. This crucial intuition is what Corbin found fundamental to *Being and Time*. For Corbin, the *da* of *Dasein* is the ‘‘act of Presence.’’

Analysis thus begins with the act of Presence and not with the knowing subject or any other thing. Presence, for Heidegger, is ontologically prior to the knowing subject, the ego. This analytic of *Dasein* takes as its starting point the multitude of ways in which we *are* in the world thus providing a rigorous philosophical analysis, which is rooted in the concrete and is not abstract. By doing so, Heidegger claims to have overcome the dualism-subject/object, spirit/matter, mind/body, and phenomena/noumenal.

This Analytic marks a revolution in Western philosophy; a radical shift from an epistemology-based philosophy to one rooted in ontology. To prioritize the mode of being of an entity over its mode of knowing is to acknowledge that the

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 62.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26-27. Heidegger continues: ‘‘Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it—all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity’s mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term ‘*Dasein*.’’’

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 62.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 67.



latter is an expression of the former. It is to go back to the fundamental question posed by Heidegger: “what do we mean by ‘being’?” Modern consciousness, following Descartes, tends to think of being as *res cogitans* (Spirit) and *res extensa* (Matter). As such, it presupposes a thinking subject, the ego, as somehow acting upon a world to understand it. The famous “cogito ergo sum” prioritizes the *cogito* in order to establish the *sum*. Thus, the *sum* “I am”, the very act of existing itself, not the *cogito* “I think”, becomes the first existential analytic in Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein*. To repeat a point we made earlier, thinking and knowing are not properties of a consciousness thinking the world around it. On the contrary, thinking and knowing are properties of the act of presence, of being-in-the-world, for *Dasein*, as Heidegger reminds us, possesses a pre-conceptual understanding of being *by* which and *through* which it is related to the world.

Thought is not *res cogitans*, it is not extrinsic to the very act of existing of the knowing subject. How do we reveal those other modes of being, the other modes of presence that go unnoticed and concealed? The key for Heidegger, as well as Corbin, is hermeneutics.

### **Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

“To the things themselves” is Husserl’s well-known maxim for a phenomenological approach to reality that gains access to the pre-reflective given-ness of things and avoids the subjectivism of modern thought. However, in contrast to Husserl who bracketed the ontological and reduced phenomena to consciousness, Heidegger proposed a phenomenology that was more essential and basic. His aim was to uncover, through an analysis of *Dasein*, those hidden meanings of existence that were prior to reflection and thought itself. To understand Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology, we must first understand what he means by phenomenology and hermeneutics.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger provides a lucid exposition of what he means by phenomenology. First, the very concept of ‘phenomenon’ is to be understood in its Greek sense of *phainomenon*, which is derived from the verb *phainesthai* “show itself”, “come to light.” Thus, phenomenon signifies “to show it self.” In Heidegger’s own words, “the expression ‘phenomenon’ signifies *that which shows itself in itself*, the manifest.” The phenomenon does not show itself through anything other than itself and in this sense, Heidegger’s ‘phenomenon’ is to be distinguished from the ‘phenomenon’ of Kant who uses it in the sense of an appearance as opposed to the thing itself, the ‘noumenon.’<sup>54</sup>

To better illustrate this Heideggerian theme, we may well refer to the later Heidegger and his discussion of the nature of truth. This discussion is important because the later Heidegger can be seen as one who was trying “fully understand and appropriate all of the ramifications of *Being and Time*’s theory of truth.”<sup>55</sup> For Heidegger, ‘truth’, or in its Greek sense *aletheia*, means bringing out of concealment. Heidegger is criticizing the theory of truth as correspondence and establishing the meaning of Truth as disclosure. Truth as correspondence depends on a primordial notion of truth as disclosure, which constitutes the very condition of the possibility of any form of propositional truth or correspondence.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the ‘phenomenon’ shows itself as a self-disclosure, a self-revealing of the thing of itself and in itself. What lies hidden in the

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Avens, “Things and Angels: Death and Immortality in Heidegger and in Islamic Gnosis,” *Hamdard Islamicus* VII, Number 2, Summer (1984), p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

phenomena is the Being of things that exist. This Being of things is precisely that which goes unnoticed, hidden, and concealed; it becomes so forgotten that not even the question of its meaning arises.<sup>57</sup>

The Greek *logos* comes to mean for Heidegger “reason, judgment, concept, definition, ground, relation.” However, its primary meaning is “making manifest” or “reveal.” *Logos* also means “talk, discourse” in the sense that discourse reveals that which is talked about. Heidegger proposes to understand ‘truth’ as a “definite mode of letting something be seen.” In this sense, Heidegger understands *logos* as a “letting-something-be-seen.”<sup>58</sup>

The meanings of both *phainomenon* and *logos* thus converge and “Phenomenology means to let what shows itself [the Phainomenon] be seen [-phainesthai] from [-apo] itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.”<sup>59</sup> Phenomenology, therefore, becomes for Heidegger our way of properly raising the question “what is Being?” and providing an adequate answer to it. In this way, phenomenology leads to ontology and ontology has as its approach to Being, phenomenology. “*Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible.*”<sup>60</sup> It is important to insist at this point that for Heidegger, there is nothing ‘behind’ the phenomena of phenomenology. The opposite of ‘*phainomenon*’ is not ‘*noumenon*’ as in Kant, but ‘covered-up-ness.’ What is covered up is not the ‘essence’ of a phenomenon concealed behind its appearance, but the very phenomenon itself in the plenitude of its being.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, the Heideggerian hermeneutics is directed towards ontology, not consciousness; it is directed towards the act of presence that pre-determines the act of understanding itself. Corbin, writing approvingly of Heidegger, has this to say:

The hermeneutic proceeds starting from the ‘act of presence’ signified in the *Da* of the *Dasein*; its task is therefore to illuminate how, in understanding itself, the human *Being-there* situates itself, circumscribes the *Da*, the *situs* of its presence and unveils the horizon which had up until then remained hidden.<sup>62</sup>

As such, Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology, unlike that of his predecessors, is not just another method of the human sciences but the most essential and basic approach towards understanding the relation between being and knowing, to account for understanding as an ontological possibility of *Dasein*. This amounts to saying that our *modus intelligendi* corresponds to our *modus essendi*; the *sum* precedes the *cogito*. For Corbin, this is the indissoluble link to which phenomenology draws our attention. “The modes of being are the ontological existential conditions of the act of ‘Understanding’, of ‘*Verstehen*’, which is to say of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the definitive task set before the phenomenologist.”<sup>63</sup>

For Heidegger, as for Corbin, in order to overcome our oblivion of being we must begin by questioning the very *modus essendi* that constitutes our most basic attitude towards what Heidegger calls our being-in-the-world; we must bring it to light. It is the mode of presence that situates us in a world and determines our very understanding of it. As such,

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<sup>57</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.56. see also Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999). p. 159.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p.58.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60.

<sup>61</sup> Avens, “Things and Angels,” p. 13

<sup>62</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p.2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology becomes a "hermeneutics of presence."<sup>64</sup> It is this connection between being and knowing in Heidegger that is so important for Corbin; a connection he also found in his study of Islamic Philosophy. For despite Corbin's immense debt to Heidegger's notion of phenomenology as "Being, aware of itself," he regards the Islamic mystics as "the first phenomenologists."<sup>65</sup>

To summarize Heidegger's legacy for Corbin, we may say that for Corbin, Heidegger's greatest merit is that he "centered the very act of philosophizing on hermeneutics."<sup>66</sup> Corbin had discovered in Heidegger's hermeneutics the "lineage of hermeneutics,"<sup>67</sup> which extended from Luther, Hamann, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, to Heidegger. The triumph of Heideggerian hermeneutics, moreover, was the "ontologization of knowledge."<sup>68</sup> That is to say that Heideggerian hermeneutics had grounded the hermeneutic act in the "act of being", or in Corbin's words, "that which we truly understand, is never other than that by which we are tried, that which we undergo, which we suffer and toil with in our very being."<sup>69</sup> This was the Lutheran influence. As Corbin explains,

Hermeneutics does not consist in deliberating upon concepts, it is essentially the unveiling or revelation of that which is happening within us, the unveiling of that which causes us to emit such or such concept, vision, projection, when our passion becomes action, it is an active undergoing, a prophetic-poetic undertaking.<sup>70</sup>

Hermeneutics, for Corbin, thus focuses on passion (what we receive and undergo) becoming action (what we understand and know). We recall that for Corbin, the link between the signifier and the signified in Heidegger's hermeneutics is *Dasein*, Being-there, human presence, "to be enacting a presence" "by which and for which meaning is revealed in the present." For Heidegger "that presence is the place of revelation."<sup>71</sup> Heidegger had overcome the subjectivist epistemology and "asserted understanding as-presence to be a function of Being as-presence, and truth as *aletheia*, unhiddenness, a perpetual journey."<sup>72</sup> Corbin, "The modality of this human presence is thus to be revelatory, but in such a way that, in revealing the meaning, it reveals itself, and is that which is revealed. And here again we are witness to the concomitance of *passion-action*."<sup>73</sup>

### Corbin's Critique of Heidegger

Up until this point, Corbin is in agreement with Heidegger and his treatment of Heidegger's analysis is straightforward; after all, it is Heidegger who gave Corbin the key to unlock those modes and levels of being that were closed to him. "This key is, if I may say so, the principal tool with which the phenomenologist's mental laboratory is equipped." This key is

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<sup>64</sup> For an analysis of this "hermeneutics of presence" in Heidegger and Suhrawardi see. Tom Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism*, (Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Journal Books, 2003), p. 50-54.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, (London: Kegan Paul International & Islamic Publications, 1983), p. 62.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XXXIX.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. XXXIX.

<sup>69</sup> Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p. 4

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 4

<sup>71</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XL.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. XL.

<sup>73</sup> Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p. 5.

hermeneutics. “Heidegger’s great merit will remain in his having centered the act of philosophizing in hermeneutics itself.”<sup>74</sup>

By the time Corbin translated *Being and Time* into French and met Heidegger in Freiburg, he had already begun exploring the rich terrain of Islamic Philosophy and had found affinities between Heidegger and the Islamic Philosophers he had been studying. These Islamic mystical philosophers had revealed to Corbin hermeneutics levels that were not *There* in Heidegger.

Every system of thought, even that of Heidegger’s is *situative* in the sense that: “its premises and their application themselves define a particular situation of human life in relation to that cosmos.” This applies to Heidegger as equally to Avicenna, Suhrawardi, or any other theosophers. Corbin,

The mode of presence assumed by the philosopher by reason of the system that he professes is what, in the last analysis, appears as the genuinely situative element in that system considered in itself. This mode of presence is usually concealed beneath the tissue of didactic demonstrations and impersonal developments. Yet it is this mode of presence that must be disclosed, for it determines, if not always the material genuineness of the motifs incorporated in the philosopher’s work, at least the personal genuineness of his motivations; it is these that finally account for the “motifs” that the philosopher adopted or rejected, understood or failed to understand, carried to their maximum of meaning or, on the contrary degraded to trivialities.<sup>75</sup>

It is the mode of presence that really situates us and determines the ‘world’ we live in and the *presences* available to us. “Like can only be known by like; every mode of understanding corresponds to the mode of being of the interpreter.”<sup>76</sup> What, may we ask, is the mode of being/presence of Heidegger? What are the ‘motifs’ that he ‘adopted or rejected’ by virtue of this presence? What is this ‘situative element’ in Heidegger?

According to Corbin, the application of the Heideggerian Hermeneutic “already tacitly posits a fundamental philosophical choice, a conception of the world, a *Weltanschauung*.” This choice of an interpretive mode, a ‘situative element,’ is already implicit in the *There (Da)* of Heidegger’s *Dasein*. Despite Heidegger’s claim to the neutrality and ontological nature of *Dasein*, he has already made a “choice”, which “announces itself at the horizon within which the ‘Analytic’ of the *Da* of *Dasein* is deployed.”<sup>77</sup> Corbin accepts that Heidegger had succeeded in his aim of laying bare the *a priori* structures of existential life, of *Dasein*, however with the proviso that these *a priori* structures are derived from the *Da*, which is a *Weltanschauung*. It is not at all necessary, concludes Corbin that we adhere to Heidegger’s *Weltanschauung* in order to make use of an Analytic of *Dasein*. One can give the *Da* of *Dasein* a different “situs” than that given to it by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and thus Heidegger’s hermeneutics becomes for Corbin the *clavis hermeneutica*, the key, with which to open the “locks” that veil access to the hidden without sharing the *Weltanschauung* of Heidegger.<sup>78</sup>

Herein lies the difference with Heidegger. Whereas Heidegger organizes his hermeneutics around the *situs* of human finitude or what he calls “Being-toward-Death,” Corbin, following the Islamic mystics he is studying, organizes his

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, translated by Willard R. Trask. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 3-4.

<sup>76</sup> Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, translated by Nancy Pearson, (New Lebanon: Omega Publications, Publisher and Bookseller, 1994). p. 145.

<sup>77</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p.8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

hermeneutics around the *situs* of a Presence, whose finality is not death, as with Heidegger, but a “Being-towards-Beyond-Death.”<sup>79</sup> The crucial question about *Dasein* is the *Da*, the *There*, the Presences. Corbin asks: “To which worlds is it being present in its being *there*.” Should one limit oneself to the world horizon of *Being and Time* or should one open up to the worlds and ‘inter-worlds’ as they are ‘dis-covered’ and ‘re-vealed’ by the Islamic mystical philosophers? The answer lies in a choice; it is a decisive choice, which cannot be avoided by any philosopher because it precedes the hermeneutical process itself. The hermeneutical process merely reveals this initial choice.<sup>80</sup>

The pre-existential philosophical choice, the *Weltanschauung*, of Heidegger clearly differs from that of the Islamic mystics. This pre-existential philosophical choice is constitutive of the *Da* of *Dasein*, the *There* of *Being-there*, the act of presence. Corbin: “I could not avoid perceiving that, beneath that somber sky, the *Da* of the *Dasein* was an isle of perdition, was precisely the isle of ‘Occidental Exile.’”<sup>81</sup> For the spiritual philosophers and mystics of Islam, “the presence they experience in the world.....lived by them, is not a Presence of which the finality is death, a ‘being-towards-death,’ but a ‘being-towards-the-other-side-of-death...’ Heidegger’s “to be for one’s death” as a sign of authentic being, becomes for the Islamic mystical philosophers a “freedom for that which is beyond death.” One’s very existence turns upon this choice. As Corbin describes it: “So long as the ‘resolute-decision’ remains simply ‘freedom for one’s death,’ death presents itself as a closure and not as an *exitus*....To be free *for that which is beyond death* is to foresee and bring about one’s death as an *exitus*, a leave-taking of this world towards other worlds. But it is the living not the dead, which leave this world.”<sup>82</sup>

Corbin’s move beyond Heidegger, however, would not have been possible without Heidegger himself. The moment Corbin had realized the full import of the “historicality” of *Dasein*, was the same moment “when taking the Heideggerian analytic as an example, I was led to see hermeneutic levels that his program had not foreseen.” These hermeneutic levels are none other than the numerous spiritual worlds towards which *the freedom for that which is beyond death* would be a *leave-taking*.<sup>83</sup>

In this different light, Heidegger’s “question of the meaning of being” is clarified and transformed. For Corbin, resoluteness, orientation, philosophy, and hermeneutics signify the unveiling of the modes of being and the corresponding modes of knowing, which is at the same time a transformation of the soul. Corbin: “The Heideggerian hermeneutics, a distant offspring of Schleiermacher, was for me the threshold of an integral hermeneutics.”<sup>84</sup> It was only a threshold, because to Corbin, “the Heideggerian hermeneutic gives the impression of a theology without theophany;” the latter being essential to all the gnostics of the Religions of the Book. There is a difference, Corbin tells us, between the “Logos of Heidegger’s onto-logy and the Logos of theo-logy.” In the Gospel of John (3/13) we find the following adage: “Nothing returns to Heaven, save that which has from it descended.” Corbin asks rhetorically: “Has the Logos of the Heideggerian Analytic come down from Heaven to be capable of re-ascending?”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p.10. See also Nile Green, “Between Heidegger and the Hidden Imam: Reflections on Henry Corbin’s Approaches to Mystical Islam,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 17, Kononklijke, Brill NV, Leiden, 2005, p. 221-223.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid , p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 11. The Recital of Occidental Exile is a visionary narrative written by Suhrawardi describing the metaphysical Occident of our Being as the place of perdition and exile. He is referring to the physical world into which the soul is cast from her abode in the metaphysical Orient of our Being, the region of angelic lights.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

The sanctity of the Divine Logos presupposes, in the Religions of the Book, the restoration of the link between theology and hermeneutics, which Corbin has been trying to achieve. As a result, Corbin's re-reading of Heidegger in the light of the Islamic mystics has brought us full circle back to the primordial link between thought and being, which we found in Hamann and Luther, but this time at a hermeneutic level beyond Heidegger. Corbin does not see Heidegger as completely against metaphysics. In fact, Corbin describes Heidegger's work in *Being and Time* as "metaphysics."<sup>86</sup> Corbin reinterprets Heidegger now in a new light:

The phenomenon of meaning, that is fundamental in the metaphysics of "Being and Time", is the link between signifier and signified. But what makes this link, without which signifier and signified would simply remain objects for theoretical consideration? This link is the subject, and this subject is the *presence*, presence of the mode of being *to* the mode of understanding. Pre-sence, *Da-sein*.<sup>87</sup>

This subject is the presence, "the presence of the mode of being *to* the mode of understanding." Thus, Corbin interprets Heidegger's *Dasein*, which is translated as "being-there", to mean a being-there that is "to be enacting a presence, enactment of that presence *by* which and *for* which meaning is revealed in the present." The mode this presence assumes is a revelatory one such that "in revealing the meaning, it reveals itself, and is that which is revealed."<sup>88</sup> Thus, the fundamental link that phenomenology discloses to us, as we said earlier, is the link between the *modus intelligendi* and the *modus essendi*. The modes of understanding/knowing correspond to the modes of being and any change in the former entails a change in the latter. The modes of being, Corbin concludes, are the "ontological, existential conditions of the act of 'Understanding', of the 'Verstehen', which is to say of hermeneutics."<sup>89</sup> But the phenomenology and the hermeneutics of presence are now carried to a deeper level. Corbin has transposed Heidegger's Analytic to a different 'situs,' a different presence; one that is open to the vertical dimension and the multitude of spiritual worlds and figures inhabiting it. This can only be re-established, *pace* Heidegger, through a restoration of the idea of theology itself as it is practiced in the modern West. The figures of "German Romantics" and "Protestant Theologians" loom large in this understanding of Corbin, as do Avicenna and Suhrawardi. Here Corbin clearly disagrees with Heidegger's distinction between philosophy and theology.

Both Heidegger and Corbin had studied medieval philosophy and mysticism and were both interested in Lutheran hermeneutics. Heidegger had written his habilitation thesis on Duns Scotus<sup>90</sup> and found particularly illuminating those passages that explain the *grammatica speculative*, which is central to Lutheran hermeneutics and which had a profound impact on Corbin.<sup>91</sup> Corbin recovers an important dimension to *Verstehen*<sup>92</sup> that many Heideggerians, and Heidegger

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<sup>86</sup> Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p. 2. see also Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence*, p. 5. See also Emmanuel Levinas critique of Heidegger in which he describes Heidegger as a classical metaphysician of sorts; and John Caputo's similar critique of Heidegger in his *Demythologizing Heidegger*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.

<sup>88</sup> Corbin, *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Corbin, Interview, p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> As we saw earlier, Heidegger had written his habilitation thesis on Duns Scotus and Etienne Gilson had already shown that Avicenna (Ibn Sina) was the starting point for Duns Scotus. Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p.3.

<sup>92</sup> There is a direct link between this notion of Dilthey and Heidegger's Analytic, a fact many Heideggerians are all too willing to overlook. This link is significant because it shows up the connection between hermeneutics and theology, which is lost to modern philosophy. Corbin proposes a "restoration" of this link in the hermeneutics of the Religions of the Book. The latter have already developed a sophisticated

himself, had forgotten. This is the link between hermeneutics and theology. This notion of ‘Understanding’, which begins with Dilthey, Schleiermacher, and leads on to Heidegger, implies a transformation in the individual souls in the very act of understanding.<sup>93</sup> The arbitrary “conflict between philosophy and theology, between faith and knowledge, between symbol and history”<sup>94</sup> is thus overcome and the true meaning of *Verstehen* restored.<sup>95</sup>

Corbin finds the link between theology and hermeneutics that he is looking for in the exegesis practiced by the Religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In this sense, Corbin radically transforms Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology into something similar to what he found in esoteric Christianity and Islam.

Why, asks Corbin, can the hermeneutics of the Religions of the Book restore this link? The answer is not hard to find. In the Religions of the Book, understanding the *true meaning* of God’s words is crucial. In this notion of understanding, three things are implied: the act of *understanding*; the phenomenon of the *meaning*; and the unveiling of the *truth* of the meaning.<sup>96</sup> We can immediately recognize the similarities this hermeneutics of the text has with the philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology of Heidegger, but especially of Hamann and Luther.<sup>97</sup> In the spirit of Hamann and Luther and the mystical theosophers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Corbin heralds the sanctity of the Verb—“the Verb that sounds with divine sovereignty.” Despite the thematic of the Word in Heidegger, it is “fraught with ambiguity.” Corbin asks: “Is it [the Word in Heidegger] a twilight—a twilight consisting in the laicizing of the Verb? Or is it a dawn, announcing the palingenesis, the resurrection of the biblical Tradition’s Verb?” One can better understand this ambiguity in Heidegger by contrasting it with the hermeneutic of the Verb in the Religions of the Book. It has the “virtue of producing a heightening, an exit, an *ek-stasis* towards those other invisible worlds which give its ‘real meaning’ to our ‘phenomenal world.’” Although for Heidegger, it is in the essence of *Dasein* to be always ahead and beyond itself, “going beyond what-is is of the essence of *Dasein*.....Metaphysics is the ground—human existence is ek-static or transcendent by definition. It is *Dasein* itself,”<sup>98</sup> it is hard to envisage a hermeneutics for which the “ek-static and transcendence” and “the going beyond” itself of *Dasein* is not a going beyond into “invisible worlds” *to* which and *in* which the mystical philosophers are *present*.

“Would Heidegger,” asks Corbin, “have followed our lead in this operation that would tend to convert the Logos of his ontology into a theological Logos?”<sup>99</sup> Corbin is uncertain of Heidegger on this; the answer depends on those posing the

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tradition of hermeneutics and exegesis with a developed vocabulary akin to that of phenomenology. (We shall see later that in the case of Heidegger, for example, certain of his vocabulary like *Erchliessen*, *Erschlossenheit*.....*Entdecken*, to dis-cover, to unveil the hidden, the *Verborgen*. All this have immediate equivalents in the classical Arabic of the theosophers of Islam that Corbin had studied. See Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 2-4.

<sup>94</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, translated by Nancy Pearson. (Princeton, New Jersey: Bollingen Series XCI:2 Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 110. For someone like Suhrawardi, “there is no true philosophy which does not reach completion in a metaphysics of ecstasy, nor mystical experience which does not demand a serious philosophical preparation.”

<sup>96</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> On the last page of his monumental essay, “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics,” Corbin quotes Schleiermacher approvingly: “All those who have still felt their life in them, or have perceived it in others, have always declared themselves against that innovation which has nothing Christian in it. The Sacred Scriptures became the Bible by means of their own power; they do not forbid any other book to be or become the Bible; they would willingly allow anything written with the same power to be added.” Schleiermacher, quoted in Corbin, “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics,” in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*. translated by Leonard Fox, West Chester Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1999), p. 134.

<sup>98</sup> Heidegger, quoted in Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XL.

<sup>99</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 15.

question. One thing is certain, Corbin found himself at home in the company of the great gnostics like: the great Gnostic Valentine, Joachim de Flore, Sebastian Franck, Jacob Boehme, Immanuel Swedenborg, and F.C. Oetinger in Christianity and Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi, and Mulla Sadra, etc. in Islam.

Following Corbin thus far, we cannot help but notice that his comparative philosophy was a result of an attentive and personal engagement with both Western and Islamic philosophical traditions. He began as a “Protestant Theologian,” a “German Romantic,” and a follower of Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology. At this point, we have seen why Corbin’s intellectual journey would lead him East to Istanbul and Tehran, and to Islamic Theosophy.

### **The Metaphysics of Presence in *Suhrawardi***

In the same way that Heidegger turned to the Pre-Socratic Greeks in search of the primordial meaning of Being especially in Parmenides, Corbin turned to Islamic mystical philosophers in search of “true philosophical thinking.”<sup>100</sup> We are justified, though, in asking why Corbin turned East towards the spiritual world of Islam when the Islamic theosophers Corbin studied presented him with many of themes he had already found in Hamann, Luther, and Heidegger as we have seen. The clue lies in the important fact that at around the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the West, and under the influence of Averroes and Aristotle, the intermediary hierarchy of angels had been lost. This intermediary hierarchy is what permitted the continual communication between Heaven and Earth, the ascent of creatures towards God through gnosis and the descent of God to his creatures through theophany. Save for a few exceptions, like the Platonist and the Western esoteric tradition, the philosophical quest in the West was destined to increasingly desacralize and demythologize the world. In the Islamic world, the story was very different. Islamic theosophers had complemented their existentialism with a Neo-Platonic hierarchy of being and an angelology as we shall now see.

Avicenna is the key figure for both Corbin and Suhrawardi.<sup>101</sup> Corbin was attracted to the “complicity between angelology and cosmology” in Avicenna because “the angelological contemplative component ontologized nature and consciousness as a single structure, confirming both the essentially spiritual nature of humanity and the soteriological structure of the cosmos.”<sup>102</sup> It was the visionary recitals that interested Corbin the most because in them Corbin found a vision of philosophy not as an abstract construct but “a lived, phenomenal reality.”<sup>103</sup> Philosophy for Avicenna was a passionate encounter with Angels; the universe is a personified cosmos.

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<sup>100</sup> Hermann Landolt, “Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, July-September, 119, 1999, p. 494.

<sup>101</sup> Corbin’s formal training began when in 1922 he received a certificate in Scholastic Philosophy from the Catholic Institute of Paris. In 1925, he completed his “*license de philosophie*” with a thesis titled “Latin Avicennism in the Middle Ages” under the great Thomist Étienne Gilson at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris. Corbin admits, that it was through Gilson that he made his first contact with Islamic philosophy, in which he discovered a “connivance between cosmology and angelology,” a discovery that never left him. The first among the text Corbin had been exposed to is Avicenna’s *Liber sextus Naturalium* In Gilson, Corbin found a formidable scholar translating medieval texts (from Arabic and Latin) produced by the Toledo School in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and bringing them to life through the “sympathetic depth of his commentary.” See Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 1. Gilson was the kind of scholar who engaged with the thought of the past by unfolding their ever present possibilities. “Indeed, Gilson’s hermeneutic ability and metaphysical rigor was so striking that Corbin took him as his first guide.” See Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxvi. Avicenna had written philosophical works in the tradition of the Peripatetics, scientific works, and three “visionary recitals,” a commentary on one Corbin found in the Hagia Sophia library in Istanbul during the war. See Bamford, *Esotericism Today* p. XLVIII.

<sup>102</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxvii.

<sup>103</sup> Corbin, *Voyage*, Introduction by Christopher Bamford, p. XLVIII.



With Avicenna, as we shall see, the universe becomes a hierarchical order of being beginning with the material world moving through the various levels of Angels leading up to the realm of the Absolute. Anthropology, angelology, and cosmology, form a continuous unity metamorphosing into each other depending on the intensity of light or being in an infinite progression of souls along the “arc of ascent” back to the supernal realm. The idea of the journey into the Orient<sup>104</sup> of our being along the vertical axis of multiple levels of being implies, according to Corbin, an “angelic pedagogy”, in which individual souls are constantly individuated by their archangel. Perhaps, as Corbin would remark, “the entire difference lies in this.”<sup>105</sup>

Suhrawardi’s point of departure was the *Oriental Philosophy* of Avicenna.<sup>106</sup> The metaphysics of Avicenna is an ontology preoccupied with the question of being. Reality depends on existence or being and knowledge is possible only if it takes the form of knowledge of the ontological status of an entity in the ‘great chain of being.’ Existence takes precedence over essence and is therefore principal (*asil*). The essence of a thing is its “ontological limitation abstracted by the mind.”<sup>107</sup> Avicenna’s division of being is threefold: the impossible (*mumtani*’), possible (*mumkin*) and necessary (*wajib*). God, unlike in Aristotle, is not a being or a substance, but rather is anterior to being itself and is what makes existence possible; he is self-subsistent and thus Necessary. The rest of existence is contingent because it is existentially dependent on the Necessary Being.

It is in the light of this fundamental distinction between God and the universe that Avicenna’s cosmology explains the emergence of the many from the One. However, whereas in his ontology Avicenna demonstrates the discontinuity between the One (Necessary Being) and the universe (contingent being), in his cosmology his preoccupation is to show the continuity between them which is tied to the significance and function of the angel as the medium of God’s creation. Thus cosmology is an angelology and vice versa, and the angel assumes a soteriological role in the process of spiritual realization and the attainment of knowledge.<sup>108</sup>

The process of God’s creation, explained in terms of the Plotinian emanation scheme, is an intellection. In Avicenna’s cosmology, the emanation from the Divine Being thinking itself produces an angelic hierarchy: the First Intelligence, the First Archangel, or Cherub; the angels who emanate from the First Archangel who govern the celestial sphere and the Ninth or highest of these spheres, the *Animae coelestes*; this is repeated from degree to degree to the Ninth Archangel, who produces the Tenth Intelligence and the Angel-Soul that moves the Heaven of the Moon; this Tenth Intelligence is Metatron, the *Protos Anthropos*, the Active Intelligence—the Angel of Humanity, the Holy Spirit, Archangel Gabriel.<sup>109</sup> At the level of the “terrestrial souls”, the cosmic procession is at the greatest remove at which point creation

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<sup>104</sup> Explain term Orient and Oriental Philosophy.

<sup>105</sup> Henry Corbin, *Avicenna*, p. 116.

<sup>106</sup> We shall define the nature of this Oriental Philosophy when we turn to Suhrawardi. It was Corbin who designated Avicenna as an Oriental Philosopher or theosopher. This designation was new and created an avalanche of criticism and opened a debate within Islamist and Orientalist circles that still continues. For a criticism of Corbin’s position on Avicenna see: A.M. Goichon, Ahmad Amin, and Dimitri Gutas for example disagree with Corbin’s fundamental understanding of the recitals as visionary symbolic narratives. A.M. Goichon, *Lexique de la Langue Philosophique d’Ibn Sina*, Paris:Desclee de Brouwer, 1938. Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988.

<sup>107</sup> Seyyid Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 27.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

<sup>109</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 67. In regards to the figure of the Metatron, Corbin explains: “Levi ben Gerson, deriving the name Metatron from the Latin *mater*, defines that Angel as Active Intelligence.” “Metatron as First Spirit, from whom all individual Spirits have emanated, is present in the latter and in all men as long as they remain in contact with the divine spiritual source. Metatron represents the

shatters into multiplicity.<sup>110</sup> Motion at the level of the “terrestrial souls” is the “result of an aspiration of love which remains forever unassuaged.”<sup>111</sup> These souls long to return to their origins, the Archangel from which they emanate. The Angel of Humanity, Archangel Gabriel, is the guide of the human souls or “terrestrial souls” that govern human bodies, who protects them and raises them into their individuated fulfilled *angelicity*. The terrestrial angel-souls imitate the *Animae coelestes* from which they emanate in order to realize their *angelicity (malaki)*, its archetype, which remains a virtual possibility, a potentiality, unless actualized. A “dualitude” of angel-souls and the Angel from which they emanate defines the nature of their relationship. Thus, the Active Intelligence leads the soul back to its state of pure intelligence, its *angelic being*. As Corbin writes: “The human being in the true sense is he who accedes to the Angel—that is, he in whom the angelic condition predominates and who steadily departs further and further from the demonic condition.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, the ideal angelic state is “in harmony with an anthropology that is only an aspect of a fundamental anthropology.” Human souls have descended into matter, into darkness, out of which they must re-ascend into the region of Light whence they originate. The human being individuates, beginning with a potential *angelicity*, and guided by its angel, is led to its Angelic counter-part in heaven. This is the meaning of *dualitude*; it is not a duality, but a *dualitude*. The soul discovers itself to be the “earthly counterpart of another being with which it forms a totality that is dual in structure.”<sup>113</sup>

The importance of this “angelic pedagogy”, for Corbin, is that the Avicennan cosmology is tied to an angelology. This “angelic pedagogy” is best expressed in Avicenna’s “Oriental Philosophy” in the form of a series of “visionary recitals.” These recitals are symbolic narratives that depict the soul’s exile in the world of generation and corruption. The Orient in these recitals symbolizes the world of light, the original abode of the soul before its incarceration in the body, the world of matter or the Occident. Such ‘visionary recitals’ depict the cosmos and existential life as an experience for a traveler seeking to return to the Orient of his/her being. In this Avicennan view, the angels are the guides along this treacherous path which humans either choose to embark upon or ignore. Only the human souls are capable of transgressing, living the ‘unauthentic’ life, and developing the demonic potentiality instead.<sup>114</sup> This angelology, as we shall see, will remain essential for the *Ishraqi* School also.

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pilgrimage of the Spirit, its descent and ascension. The identity of the Metatron with Enoch symbolizes the descent of the Spirit into earthly life—that is, into the existence of earthly man—and the ascent of this earthly man to heavenly being. In heaven he is the interpreter of man’s pilgrimage. As the etymologies of his name (Metator, Mithra, Mater-Matrona, related to Shakhina, Metathronos, etc). Corbin, *Avicenna*, p. 66. See also Harold Bloom, “The Ksbbsh: Metatron, The Lesser Yahweh,” in *Omens of Millenium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*, Riverhead Books, New York, p. 202-207. where he defines the Metatron as “the Kabbalistic Angel of Divine Presence, who is the transmogrified patriarch Enoch,” p. 202. See also Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, edited by R.J. ZWI Werblowsky. Translated by Allan Arkush, The Jewish Publication Society, Princeton University Press, 1990, where he quotes Isaac the Blind as saying that: “Metatron is only messenger, and not a specific thing bearing that name. Rather, every messenger is called in Greek *metator*, and perhaps the messengers received the influx of the [tenth sefirah] named ‘*atarah* to fulfill their mission.” Scholem continues: “Metatron is therefore not a proper name at all but a designation for the whole category of celestial powers performing a mission.” P. 298-299. There are striking parallels with the Archangel Gabriel as the Tenth Intelligence in the cosmology of Avicenna and Suhrawardi.

<sup>110</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 46.

<sup>111</sup> Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, translated by Liadain Sherrard & Philip Sherrard, (London and New York: Kegan Paul International & Islamic Publications, for Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1996), p. 171.

<sup>112</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 83.

<sup>113</sup> Corbin, under the influence of Jung and the Eranos group referred to this pair of the *dualitude* as the ego and the Self. See Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 20. This book was one of Corbin’s early writings. Later in his writings, Corbin would generally avoid the terminology of the Eranos group. In his *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Corbin avoids any of this kind of technical jargon remaining as faithful as he could to the technical vocabulary of his authors.

<sup>114</sup> Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 46.

For reasons we shall explore further, Corbin would become the disciple of Suhrawardi<sup>115</sup> and spend many years in philosophical and ascetic meditation in the “presence and company of the young Shaykh al-Ishraq.”<sup>116</sup> Suhrawardi would be Corbin’s closest companion for the rest of his life. With Suhrawardi’s *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, “a Platonism, expressed in terms of Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia,” Corbin’s “spiritual destiny” “from Heidegger to Suhrawardi” was “sealed.” Corbin would learn “the discipline of the arcane” or the “virtues of Silence” (Arabic/Persian *ketman*), in the company of the invisible Shieyk of Ishraq, Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi. The latter was martyred at Aleppo in 1091 at the age of thirty-six, the age of Corbin at the time. By the end of the six years, Corbin had become an Ishraqi himself.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> In 1928, Corbin met Louis Massignou whom he described as “extraordinary.” Massignou had confirmed Corbin’s own gnostic and intuitive approach in an academic environment that had become sterile and “disinterested.” See Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. xxviii. For Corbin, there was no escaping his influence. Massignou had a “fiery soul” and an “intrepid penetration into the arcane regions of the mystical life of Islam,” which left a deep impression on the young Corbin. Indeed, not only was Corbin impressed by Massignou’s intellectual depth and mystical insights, but also by the “nobility of his indignations before the shortcomings of this world.” Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 3. For Corbin the Platonist, philosophy was a way of life to be practiced and lived out; a spiritual path, the conjunction of a cosmology and soteriology. It is in this spirit and mindset that Corbin attended the lectures of Jean Baruzi on the young Luther and other “Protestant Spirituals” like Sebastian Franck, Caspar Schwenkfeld, and Valentin Weigel, etc...The turning point in Corbin’s intellectual development came when Massignou turned Corbin’s attention to Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi the Iranian born theosopher of Illumination, “The Imam of the Persian Platonists” or the Oriental Theosopher as Corbin would call him. Massignou had handed Corbin a copy of Suhrawardi’s *Hikmat al-Ishraq*. ““Here,” Massignou said to Corbin, “I believe that there is something in this book for you.” Interestingly enough, Massignou had anticipated Corbin’s future critics like John Walridge when he warned Corbin not to “over Mazdeanize” Suhrawardi’s self-proclaimed goal as “resurrector of the Illuminationist Theosophy of the ancient Persian sages.” Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 3. In 1933, Corbin translated Suhrawardi’s *On the Essence of Love (The Vade-Mecum of the Fedeli d’Amore)* and had already finished an intensive reading of Suhrawardi’s *Hikmat al-Ishraq* (The Oriental Theosophy) that Massignou had given to him; in 1935 he translated Suhrawardi’s *The Rustling of Gabriel’s Wings*. The significance of these short recitals for Corbin will become apparent later. It is no wonder then that the Karl Barth of the *Dogmatics* dismissed Suhrawardi’s *The Rustling of Gabriel’s Wings* as “Natural Theology.” For Corbin, Barth’s later theology was preparing the ground for the “death of God.” On the controversy Barth’s theology had stirred among Corbin’s intellectual circle, Corbin notes: “I myself might well have been dragged into that same mess if between times there hadn’t arisen one of those decrees issued in the Invisible by the Invisible; if I had not been drawn aside, into a complete philosophical and theological solitude, which allowed an altogether different philosophy and theology to take root in me.”Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 8. In 1939, Corbin was sent to Istanbul to gather photocopies of manuscripts on Suhrawardi for a critical edition of his work but found himself unable to leave because of the war; and so between 1939 and 1945, Corbin would spent six years in Istanbul in philosophical and ascetic meditation and would learn “the discipline of the arcane” or the “virtues of Silence” (Arabic/Persian *ketman*), in the company of the invisible Shieyk of Ishraq, Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi. The latter was martyred at Aleppo in 1091 at the age of thirty-six, the age of Corbin at the time. By the end of the six years, Corbin had become an Ishraqi himself. Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 8-9.

<sup>116</sup> Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 4

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8-9.

*Ishraq* (a verbal noun) literally means the “splendor or illumination of the sun when it rises,”<sup>118</sup> or “the hour when the horizon is lighted by the fires of dawn.” In reference to the school of Suhrawardi, it can come to mean the wisdom or theosophy of which the “rising of the sun” (*Ishraq*) is the source “being both the illumination and reflection (*zuhur*) of being, and the act of awareness which, by unveiling it (*kashf*), is the cause of its appearance (makes it a *phainomenon*).”<sup>119</sup> Just as the first appearance of the sun signifies the dawn of day in the sensible realm, the rise of the ‘spiritual’ sun in the intelligible realm “signifies the epiphanic moment of knowledge.”<sup>120</sup> Oriental Philosophy, or theosophy, comes to mean a “doctrine founded on the Presence of the philosopher at the matutinal appearance of the intelligible Lights.”<sup>121</sup> Metaphysically, it refers to gnostic knowledge (*irfani*) where the Orient is “the world of the beings of Light, from which the dawn of knowledge and ecstasy rises in the pilgrim of the spirit.”<sup>122</sup> Oriental Philosophy postulates “inner vision and mystical experience....because it originates in the Orient of pure Intelligences....an *Oriental* knowledge.” The Ishraqiyun, the Oriental Philosophers, otherwise called by Corbin the “Platonists of Persia,” are those philosophers who follow the Oriental Philosophy of Suhrawardi. Their knowledge is *Oriental* because it is “based on inner revelation (*kashf*) and mystical vision (*mushahadah*).”<sup>123</sup>

Suhrawardi did not claim to be inventing something new with his *Oriental Philosophy*. He saw himself as a reviver, a resuscitator of the Wisdom of the ancient Persian Sages. As Suhrawardi writes:

Among the ancient Persians there was a community directed by God; He guided the eminent Sages, who are quite different from the Maguseans (*majusi*). It is their high doctrine of the Light—a doctrine to which, moreover, the experience of Plato and his predecessors bear witness—that I have revived in my book entitled *Oriental Theosophy (Hikmat al-Ishraq)*, and no one before me has attempted such a project.<sup>124</sup>

Suhrawardi had begun as a defender of the “celestial physics” and the rational philosophy of the Peripatetics. However, in a personal “ecstatic vision,” he saw this limited spiritual universe explode and was shown “the multitude of those beings of Light whom Hermes and Plato contemplated, and the celestial beams which are the sources of the *Light of Glory* and of the *Sovereignty of Light (ray wa khurrah)* heralded by Zarathustra, towards which a spiritual rapture raised the most devout and blessed King Kay Khusraw.”<sup>125</sup> The “eternal leaven” is precisely this *Light of Glory*, the *Xvarnah (khurrah* in Persian)<sup>126</sup>, the resplendent presence (Arabic *sakina* Hebrew *Shekhina*) of the Divine Glory, “the victorious, archangelic Light-being-presence.”<sup>127</sup> The idea is that the *Deus absconditus* is known and perceived only by its manifestation *Deus revelatus*, as an angel. The *Xvarnah* is thus perceived as an angel-figure of the spiritual world of lights (Dii-angeli of Proclus).

<sup>118</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 209.

<sup>119</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 209.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>122</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 110.

<sup>123</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 209.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XLV.

<sup>125</sup> Suhrawardi, quoted in Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 208.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

<sup>127</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XLVI.

Suhrawardi succeeded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>128</sup> in bringing together, and uniting, the *Prisca Theologia* of Hermes, the priest-kings Gayomart, Fereydun, and Kay Khosraw, as well as Zoroaster, Asklepius, Empedocles, Pythagoras, Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the great masters of Islamic Sufism Abu Yazid Bastami, Hallaj, Sahl al-Tustari “the traveler from Tustar,” and Dhu’l-Nun al-Misri “the brother from Akhmim.”<sup>129</sup> Indeed, one finds in Suhrawardi an early exponent of a *philosophia perennis*.<sup>130</sup> “Do not imagine philosophy has existed only in recent times,” Suhrawardi tells his readers, “The world has never been without philosophy or without a person possessing proofs and clear evidences to champion it.”<sup>131</sup> All these great sages constituted for Suhrawardi an “eternal leaven,”

We have confined the knowledge of True Reality to our book entitled *Oriental Theosophy*, a book in which we have revived the ancient wisdom which has never ceased to be taken as a pivot by the Imams (Guides) of India, Persia, Chaldea, Egypt, as well as those of ancient Greece up to Plato, and from which they drew their own theosophy: this wisdom is the Eternal Leaven.<sup>132</sup>

It is in his *magnum opus*, *The Theosophy of Oriental Light (Hikmat al-Ishraq)*, or the *Oriental Philosophy*, that Suhrawardi set out to expound this Eternal Leaven by combining the various traditions that had once possessed it: a revived Zoroastrian philosophy of Light and Darkness and its angelology with the prophetic tradition of the Quran and the pre-Islamic traditions of wisdom handed down from Hermes and the Greeks (Pythagoras and Plato especially). One of Suhrawardi’s main philosophical contributions is his conception of existence in terms of light. Light-being is understood as existence. In Suhrawardi’s own words:

The Essence of the First Absolute Light, God, gives constant illumination, whereby it is manifested and it brings all things into existence, giving life to them by its rays. Everything in the world is derived from the Light of His essence and all beauty and perfection are the gift of His bounty, and to attain fully to this illumination is salvation.<sup>133</sup>

Everything in existence is ranked according to the intensity of light that it possesses. God, the Light of Lights is at the apex of this hierarchy at the end of which is matter, darkness. Humans being are a combination of both matter/body and soul, the latter being the element of light in humans. Ordinary light is one manifestation of the light of lights with a particular intensity. All existents are merely various degrees and intensities of light and darkness. From the Neo-Platonists, Suhrawardi borrows the theory of “emanation” (*sudur*) and develops a sophisticated *ontology of light*. From the Light of Lights (*nur al-anwar*) there flows a sacred light cascading down ‘the great chain of being.’ The crucial insight of Suhrawardi, which he obtains through a mystical intuition or vision, is the flowing of sacred light from the Light of Lights. This is the fundamental principle of illumination that Suhrawardi would later develop into his doctrine of “knowledge as presence” (*al-ilm al huduri*). Every “hypostasis of Light” is constituted by means of departure from the hypostasis

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<sup>128</sup> Indeed, it was centuries later that the Byzantine philosopher Gemistos Pletho would do the same at the court of Cosimo de Medici. See Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 206.

<sup>129</sup> John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>130</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 69.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Walbridge, *Wisdom of the Mystic East*, p. 14

<sup>132</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XLVI.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages, Three Muslim Sages*, p. 69.

immediately superior to it and to which it yearns. Each inferior light (*nur safil*) loves the higher light (*al-nur al-'ali*) by what Suhrawardi calls “intrinsic yearning” (*mahabbah*). The rational soul (*nafs natiqah*)<sup>134</sup>, like all other existents, yearns for the light above it. The similarities of Suhrawardi’s universe to that of Proclus’ “divinized” cosmos where every level of being is populated by gods, or an angel, is evident. Suhrawardi’s cosmology resembles Avicenna’s cosmology but Suhrawardi substitutes Light for existence and borrows the names of the angels directly from Zoroastrianism. In this, Suhrawardi had gone beyond the distinction between Necessary Being and Contingent Being in Avicenna and declared all of reality to be nothing other than light, which varies only in degrees of intensity. There no longer exists a discontinuity in existence as it did in Avicenna, a problem he inherits from Aristotle’s notion of “substance”, because light traverses all of existence from the Light of Glory, what the Avesta calls *Xvarnah*, or what Suhrawardi designates as the Light of Lights down through the cascade of being to the lowest of creatures and inanimate objects. The Light of Light (*nur al-anwar*) is Suhrawardi’s designation for the Divine Essence, whose luminosity and intensity are blinding.<sup>135</sup> The Light of Light (*nur al-anwar*) is the source of all existence, which partakes of this same essence, though in various degrees of light and darkness. In Suhrawardi’s own words:

The Essence of the First Absolute Light, God, gives constant illumination, whereby it is manifested and it brings all things into existence, giving life to them by its rays. Everything in the world is derived from the Light of His essence and all beauty and perfection are the gift of His bounty, and to attain fully to this illumination is salvation.<sup>136</sup>

From the above quotation we can summarize a number of crucial *Ishraqi* doctrines. First, *Ishraqi* ontology is an ontology of light whereby the ontological status of a being is determined by the degree of its luminosity, its intensity of light, which amounts to saying, the degree to which it approaches the Light of Light and is illuminated by it. On this understanding, beings can be distinguished by their degree of light, or otherwise of darkness. Light may be understood here as “existence” in the sense of *actus essendi*, whereby light is the only single reality. This identification of Light and Being is possible when light is understood as universal matter—*material prima universalis*.<sup>137</sup> Thus, all the gradations of being, whether of body or spirit, participate in this universal matter, differentiated only by “intervals of degree.” This is not a philosophical monism for “spiritual reality is not something abstract, but a concrete spirituality”<sup>138</sup>. We can say, then, that Corbin and his spirituals profess a “spiritual realism.” Suhrawardi’s metaphysics of light-being becomes a metaphysics of presences, an angelology, in which the angels carry out the ontological task at every level of being and it is through this hierarchy of angels that the seeker of truth (*salik*), in Suhrawardi’s visionary recitals, must traverse with the guidance of the angels back to his Oriental abode. How does this angelology tie in with his hierarchy of Lights?

We also notice in the quotation an identification of being with knowing, or the degree of luminosity with the degree of salvation. In fact, in *Ishraqi* philosophy, they are one and the same thing. On this understanding, we can distinguish beings

<sup>134</sup> Corbin, Henry, *Opera Metaphysiques et Mystica* 3, Paris, 1952 Opera 3, 107.

<sup>135</sup> Seyyid Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 69.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Nasr, *Ibid*, p. 69.

<sup>137</sup> Corbin finds this notion of universal matter in the Cambridge Platonists (*spissitudo spiritualis*) and in Jacob Boehme and Immanuel Swedenborg as we shall see further

<sup>138</sup> Robert Avens, “Henry Corbin and Suhrawardi’s Angelology,” *Hamdard Islamicus* XI, Number 1, Spring (1988), p. 5.

by their degree of ‘comprehension’ or ‘awareness’<sup>139</sup>, which amounts to saying that to the extent that a being increases its degree of awareness of itself, it is illuminated and its ontological status, or degree of luminosity, intensity of light, increases, as it approaches the Light of Light. This identification of knowledge with light and salvation is an important soteriological element in Suhrawardi’s philosophy. Light never becomes the object of vision but it is that which makes vision possible and enables seeing. “It is the goal of vision, and at the same time the guide towards the goal.”<sup>140</sup> The process begins with self-knowledge, which is complete at the summit of the journey and made possible by the guidance of the angels at the various levels of reality. Each angel in a higher rung of existence manifests itself in its glorious light by virtue of the seeker’s capacity to attain to its contemplation. Illumination=Contemplation=Knowledge=Existence=Presence. Here Suhrawardi’s concepts of light, self, consciousness, being, and presence become identical because of his ontology of lights. The closer one gets to the Light of Lights, the One, the greater the intensity of one’s light is, the greater one’s knowledge is, and the more intense is one’s Presence. Therefore, he who knows more *is* more. This angelology is also a spiritual pedagogy as with Avicenna. However, there is a fundamental difference between them and this is the doctrine of Light.<sup>141</sup>

The significance of Suhrawardi’s ontology of light for our discussion is that it forms the metaphysical basis for his mystical philosophy and gnosis. Most of his “Illuminative” terminology makes use of symbols (*rumuz*), metaphors, and “visionary recitals.” The language of attaining to knowledge is couched in the language of “Illumination.” As we saw earlier, the mystical method developed by Suhrawardi is a direct method of knowing and being, which he calls “knowledge as presence” (*al-‘ilm al-huduri*) and which he contrasted to “knowledge as acquisition” (*al-‘ilm al-husuli*).<sup>142</sup> The latter is acquired through discursive means while the former is a non-discursive kind of knowledge that yields certainty because it is achieved through the Ishraqi notions of “vision” (*ibsar*), “tasting” (*zawq*), mystical vision (*kashf*), “inner witnessing” (*mushahada*).<sup>143</sup>

In Suhrawardi’s *Ishraqi Philosophy*, then, the moment of mystical contemplation (*mushahada*) by the soul of its angel, the lower hypostasis of the higher, the lower light contemplating the higher light, its presence to its angel, is the moment of reciprocal illumination of the angel of the soul, the higher light illuminating the lower light, the angel’s presence to the soul. It is this reciprocal relationship that constitutes the phenomenon of Illumination/Presence.<sup>144</sup> Light, the essence of all existence, reveals itself once there is an immediate and direct perception of it, which is a direct Presence to it. Seeing light=being light; this is the nature of gnostic quest.

### **Conclusion: From Heidegger to Suhrawardi: Being as Presence to *Other Worlds***

For Corbin, as we have seen, Heidegger’s Analytic is strikingly similar to that of his Islamic theologians but active on a lower plane of being/reality. We recall for Heidegger, phenomenology means “what is visible in the light,” what shows itself

<sup>139</sup> Seyyid Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 70.

<sup>140</sup> See Corbin, *En islam iranienne: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Volume2: *Suhrawardi et les platoniciens de perse*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 83 and Avens, “Henry Corbin and Suhrawardi’s Angelology,” p. 6.

<sup>141</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 206-207.

<sup>142</sup> See Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1992.

<sup>143</sup> Hossein Ziai “Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi: Founder of the Illumination School,” in Seyyid Hossein Nasr, and Oliver Leamen. *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 434-457.

<sup>144</sup> For a discussion of the reciprocal relation between Emanation/Illumination and Absorption/Contemplation Mehdi Ha’iri Yazdi, “Mystical Unity,” *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1992.

forth in itself from underneath the veils. Thus, phenomenology as a method unveils that which is hidden and concealed beneath the appearance. Corbin translated phenomenology in terms of the Islamic practice of *Kashf al-Mahjub* or literally, “the unveiling of the hidden.” Since understanding the meaning of Being is only possible by interpreting the various modes of being/presence of *Dasein*, Heidegger concludes, “phenomenology of *Dasein* is hermeneutic.” Corbin understands hermeneutics in terms of the Islamic practice of *Ta'wil*, or literally, “the leading back of something to its archetype.” However, Heidegger’s own Analytic was limited by the worldview and philosophical choice implicit in the *Da* of his *Dasein*. Thus, it was in Suhrawardi and the Islamic mystical philosophers that Corbin found hermeneutical levels unavailable to Heidegger’s Analytic.

Here we arrive at the fundamental differences between Suhrawardi and Heidegger. We may say that Heidegger’s analysis of the modalities of the self, or the ways in which *Dasein* exists, applies to *Dasein* only. Despite Heidegger’s rejection of any relation between philosophical anthropology or psychology to his analysis of *Dasein*, and his insistence that it is strictly a phenomenological inquiry into the meaning of Being, Heidegger did put forward a view of the cosmos, a *Weltanschauung* as Corbin noted, or a cosmology.

We can see here Heidegger’s attempt to help in building a new cosmos to take the place of the traditional one that Cartesianism had destroyed. It is not a cosmos of immutable Essences, teleologically ordered, as conceived by the Greeks, nor is it the meaningful order and hierarchy of divine Essences of medieval times. It is rather a cosmos, a world, of an ever active manifestation of the ways...modes (in which *Dasein* is).<sup>145</sup>

We recall from our analysis of Heidegger that the ‘situs’ or presence underlying the There or the Da of *Dasein* implies a Being-Towards-Death, which is alien to the thought of our Islamic mystical philosophers. Corbin had rejected the underlying *Weltanschauung*, cosmology, or the *situative* element underlying Heidegger’s Analytic but made full use of the *clavis hermeneutica*. Subsequently, Corbin would come to realize that “true commitment is only possible toward that which belongs to Metahistory and only by him who is conscious of his polar dimension [angelic dimension], because it is precisely this dimension that transforms his act of existing into an act of presence to the world beyond death.”<sup>146</sup> The overwhelmingly “anthropomorphic” nature of *Dasein* may have been the reason behind Corbin’s initial translation of *Dasein* as *réalité-humaine* [human-reality].

When we turn to Suhrawardi, we find that his analysis of light-being applies to the entire hierarchy of existence, or the hierarchy of Lights. Thus, Suhrawardi’s ontology of Light is cosmological in its very nature.. The difference with Heidegger is that this hierarchical cosmos, this ontology of light-being, or metaphysics of being, is only intelligible for a view of existence in which “the act of being” is in accordance with its “presence” to these spiritual angelic worlds. That is to say, unlike Heidegger, Suhrawardi’s metaphysics of Light-Being “culminates in a metaphysics of Presence.” Suhrawardi’s characterizes the *act of being* as a function of Presence (*hudur*), such that the degree of *existence*, the intensity of *Light*, is proportionate to the degree of *presence*. This has Heideggerian overtones, but as Corbin never ceases to remind us, the mode

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<sup>145</sup> Werner Marx, “Heidegger’s New Conception of Philosophy,” *Social Research* 22, 1955, p. 474, quoted in, Alparslan Acikgenc *Being and Existence in Sadra and Heidegger: A Comparative Ontology*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1993), p. 97.

<sup>146</sup> See Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, Vol 4, p. 80.



of being/presence in the hierarchy of spiritual worlds is fundamentally different from that mode of being/presence to *Being-Towards-Death*. For Suhrawardi,

the proportionate relationship between existence and presence means that the more intense the presence, the more it becomes Presence in other world and the more the being draws away from those determinations which entail unconsciousness, death, and absence. The more the existence of man is Presence, the more also the human being is the Witness of other worlds and the less his being is “being for death” and the more it is being-for-beyond-death.<sup>147</sup>

In other words, although Heidegger had *ontologized* knowledge, which means that “that which we truly understand, is never other than that by which we are tried, that which we undergo, which we suffer and toil with in our very being” and had understood being in terms of presence, his notion of presence was on a much lower level of being than that of Corbin’s Islamic spirituals like Suhrawardi. For Suhrawardi, ontological knowledge is *presential*.

The starting point of this realization for Suhrawardi is in the *Intimations* where he recounts a visionary dream he had of Aristotle<sup>148</sup> in which Suhrawardi is told that the key to knowledge is the self’s knowledge of itself. “Awaken to yourself,” Aristotle tells Suhrawardi. “Is the knowledge which you have of yourself a direct perception of yourself by yourself, or do you get it from something else?” Aristotle asks Suhrawardi.<sup>149</sup> Corbin describes the ensuing encounter:

Then there begins a progressive initiation into self-knowledge as knowledge which is neither the product of abstraction nor a representation of the object through the intermediary of a form (*surah*), of a Species, but a Knowledge which is identical to the Soul itself, to the personal, existential (*ana’iyah*) subjectivity, and which is therefore essentially life, light, epiphany, awareness of self (*hayat, nur, zuhur, shu ‘ur bi-dhatihi*). In contrast to representative knowledge, which is knowledge of the abstract or logical universal (*‘ilm suri*), what is in question is presential, unitive, intuitive knowledge, of an essence which is absolutely real in its ontological singularity (*‘ilm huduri, ittisali, shuhudi*)—a presential illumination (*ishraq huduri*) which the soul, as a being of light, causes to shine upon its object. By making herself present to herself, the soul also makes the object present to her. Her own epiphany to herself is the Presence of this Presence, and it is this which constitutes the epiphanic or Oriental Presence (*hudur Ishraqi*). The truth of all objective knowledge is thus nothing more nor less than the awareness that the knowing subject has of its self. This is the case for all the beings of light in all the worlds and inter-worlds: by the very act of their self-awareness, they cause themselves to be present to each other.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Corbin, *En islam iraniene*, Vol 1, p. 322.

<sup>148</sup> The author of *The Theology of Aristotle* is actually Plotinus, which makes much more sense; a fact Suhrawardi had already hit on when he refers the author as a Platonist. Plotinus found his way into the Islamic corpus of knowledge in the form of a paraphrase of his *Enneads* IV, V, and VI in a book known as *The Theology of Aristotle*. As the title shows, the book was wrongly attributed to Aristotle though the most astute of Islamic philosophers, such as a Suhrawardi, did not fail to notice its real ‘Platonic’ underpinnings. This has raised interesting questions about the link between Suhrawardi and Plotinus. *The Theology of Aristotle* “Kitab Uthulujiyya Aristotalis” has been edited and published by Abdurrahman Badawi in his Plotinus apud Arabes/Aflutin ‘ind al-‘Arab. His introduction to the book provides a good overview of how this pseudo-Aristotle was received in Arab/Islamic Philosophy. Most quotations in this article from Plotinus are from *Enneads* IV, V, and VI. Although a rigorous comparison between the translated *Theology of Aristotle* and Plotinus’ *Enneads* is in order, the aims of this essay are much more modest.

<sup>149</sup> Quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 119.

<sup>150</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 210.

Is presential, ontological knowledge possible through the presence of the self to itself or is it “representational, epistemological knowledge (of objects by a knowing subject)?”<sup>151</sup> ‘Aristotle’ thus initiated Suhrawardi into “presential knowledge” as opposed to *re*-presentative knowledge, which provides knowledge that is not direct and mediated through form and abstract *re*presentations, which is unmediated: “To perceive yourself, you do not need anything other than your own self.”<sup>152</sup> For Suhrawardi, when the veils of darkness are lifted, the soul, made of light, is directly present to her angel. “Like can only be known by like.” This is the true meaning of presence. Corbin, “this presence consists in the soul’s rising on the object present, thus reaching it present by her presence; its epiphany is the presence of this presence.”<sup>153</sup>

The power of presence is “proportional to the degree of light....of proximity to the true Light,”<sup>154</sup> the Light of Light (*nur al-anwar*). The more presence, the more light, the more the soul is conscious, the greater her degree as ‘witness’ to her angel.

The true philosophers, Aristotle reminds Suhrawardi, are not the Rationalist or the Peripatetics, but the mystics Abu Yazid al-Bastami and al-Hallaj who like Plato had experienced “presential illumination” (*hudur Ishraqi*) and inner vision (*mushahada*). What the latter have and the former lack is the experiential component of mystical union, a direct Presence to the Divine light. The truths or *haqa’iq* are known through a mystical intuition, an experiential mode of knowledge, in which, Corbin claims, the *Ishraqi* metaphysics of being (*wujud*) “culminates in that of presence (*hudur*).” Full knowledge of existence is made possible only in so far as it takes the form of self-realization, where Reality is accessed through “inner witnessing” (*mushahada*), “tasting” (*zawq*), “presence” (*hudur*), or “illumination” (*ishraq*).

Thus, we see that only with a complex and elaborate metaphysical structure does the ontological continuity between human souls and the celestial souls in the intelligible realm make sense. It is this particular dimension of the “act of being” which makes possible the place or world of the imagination. Corbin criticizing Averroes’ rejection of Avicenna’s angelology, and implicitly, the West’s rejection of Avicennian angelology, has this to say:

Celestial Souls and human souls share the modality of not being purely intelligential or intellective in the first constitution of their essence; they have in common the function of ruling and governing physical bodies. To do this, they must *imagine*. The whole immense world of the imaginable, the universe of symbol (*alam al-mithal*), would not exist without the soul....The body which they [the Angels] are furnished and which “materializes” the thought of the same Archangel is made of a “celestial matter,” a subtle and incorruptible *quinta essentia*. For this reason, and because unlike human imaginations, theirs are not dependent on sensible knowledge, their imaginations are *true*.<sup>155</sup>

For the world of the soul to make any sense, to restore the communication between Heaven and Earth an entire cosmology, a hierarchical personified cosmos, a metaphysical structure, a view of existence, is needed in which the “*act of being*” accords with its “*presence*” in the inter-worlds of the imagination. The act of being, the degree of illumination, must accord with its

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<sup>151</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today* p. XXIV.

<sup>152</sup> Suhrawardi, *Hikmat al-Ishraq : Le De La Sagesse Orientale*, trans Henry Corbin, (Verdier, 1986), 116. 112.2-3, p. 103.

<sup>153</sup> Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XXIV.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, p. XXIV.

<sup>155</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and The Visionary Recitals*, p. 74.

presence (*hudur*) to its archetypal essences, the intelligibles of the supernal realm, to the angel of its being, at the threshold of the imaginal realm. Corbin is worth quoting in length:

If we do not have available a cosmology whose schema can include, as does the one that belongs to our traditional philosophers, the plurality of universes in ascensional order, our Imagination will remain *unbalanced*, its recurrent conjunctions with the will to power will be an endless source of horrors. We will be continually searching for a new discipline of the Imagination, and we will have great difficulty in finding it as long as we persist in seeing in it only a certain way of keeping our *distance* with regard to what we call the *real*, and in order to exert an influence on that real. Now, that real appears to us arbitrarily limited, as soon as we compare it to the real that our traditional theosophers have glimpsed, and that limitation degrades the reality itself. In addition, it is always the word *fantasy* that appears as an excuse: literary fantasy, for example, or preferably, in the taste and style of the day, social fantasy.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 19-20.